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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 KINSHASA 001345

SIPDIS

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PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHER

FROM BRAZZAVILLE EMBASSY OFFICE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CONGO-B: AN ASSESSMENT OF POLITICAL STYLE AND VISION

REF: KINSHASA 001329

1. (U) This is an action request. See paragraph 10.

2. (SBU) SUMMARY: A product of years of strife, struggle, and coalition building to gain and retain power, Congolese President Denis Sassou-Nguesso has emerged as the uncontested and unquestioned leader of government, chairman of the corporate board, and visionary of a better future for the people of Congo. He has amassed considerable wealth, co-opted or neutralized his political opponents, and appears to be concerned about his international image and his historical legacy. In order to achieve his objectives for the future, and while maintaining strict control of the ship of state, he has shown a willingness to seek and accept the advice and assistance of the international community to develop critical sectors of the economy and to increase openness and transparency in government. The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved an \$84.4 million Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) for the Republic of Congo on December 6, 2004, and the Paris Club has agreed to reschedule its foreign debt. The French oil company TotalFinaElf and the Government of France continue strong ties with Congo, and China is moving to establish its presence in Congo as well as elsewhere in Africa. As a gesture to encourage President Sassou to continue on a path of sustained economic growth, poverty reduction, transparency and good governance, and to improve the observance of human rights in Congo, CDA recommends that AS Frazer meet with President Sassou during his planned visit to New York city for the meeting of the UN General Assembly in September 2005. END SUMMARY.

THE VISION STATEMENT

3. (U) In his State of the Nation address delivered before a joint session of parliament on August 8, 2005, President Sassou outlined his vision of a strategy to strengthen democratic institutions, to accelerate economic growth and development, to reduce poverty, and to cooperate with international financial institutions to sustain the social, financial, and economic programs of his government. Emphasizing the importance of peace and security in building democratic institutions, he accepted the challenge to build a peaceful democracy that would be unceasingly improved and reinforced. He announced a plan to build democracy at the local level through decentralization and delegation of authority. He appealed to the private sector and financial institutions to join hands with his government to create enterprises and to fight unemployment. He warned corrupt civil servants that they could undermine the nation's economic and social foundation and said they would be rooted out. The aim of his government, he said, is to develop and transfer skills in the fields of public education, health, social affairs, civilian protection, transportation and public works, commerce, tourism and the crafts industry.

4. (U) The President said his major preoccupation is putting an end to the multiple problems of public access to water and electricity, and cited several building projects that will expand the electric and water supply. These include the water projects at Nkombo, Sibiti, and Mossaka, the thermal power station in Mpila and the hydro-electric complex at Imboulou. He announced that the government has adopted a National Plan for Regional Development that will soon be submitted to the Parliament for approval. The plan will outline a strategy to advance the harmonious development of the country to achieve its full potential, he said. A major portion of the speech was devoted to a detailed status report on the arrangement with the IMF for the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) and the Paris Club debt rescheduling. Giving specific figures on the amounts of debt involved, he concluded that Congo had just benefited from foreign debt cancellation and rescheduling measures in relation to three bilateral partners: France, the United States, and Italy. With the

entire diplomatic corps and heads of international organizations assembled in the Hall of Congress (Palais du Parlement), President Sassou seized the opportunity to express recognition and thanks to the countries, international financial institutions, as well as other partners who brought their help and support to Congo's work of reconstruction and development. As you can see, he said, our efforts were not in vain.

THE REALITY

15. (U) There are indications that President Sassou is committed to meeting the IMGF targets as set forth under the PRGF arrangements as well as the Paris Club criteria for debt relief. The chiefs of all diplomatic missions and international organizations in Brazzaville have formed an advisory group called Partners for Poverty Reduction in Congo. The Group meets periodically, usually monthly, with the Minister of Plans (or his representative) to assess approaches and progress and to offer technical advice and assistance to the government on how to meet IMF targets and reduce poverty. The group is chaired by the World Bank Resident Representative and includes representatives from donor agencies such as UNDP, IMF, AU, ICRC, UNHCR, and UNICEF. The group has emphasized the need for a comprehensive development plan that identifies actions that each ministry must implement, not just the Ministry of Plans. Time tables, follow-up and oversight functions have been emphasized. A smaller oversight committee has been formed within the larger group consisting of the World Bank, IMF, UNDP and AU representatives and the Ambassadors of France and the United States. When it appears that advice is not being well received or that programs are lagging off schedule, this watch-dog committee will request an audience with the President to advise him personally of corrective measures required to stay on course. President Sassou has welcomed this international intervention and assistance.

16. (U) In the area of economic development, China has assumed a leading role. The China Machinery Equipment Corporation (CMEC) entered into a contract with the Congolese Government on March 25, 2003, to construct a dam on the Lefini River at Imboulou located about 125 miles north of Brazzaville. Construction started in April of this year and is expected to be completed in 2009 at a cost of some \$250 million. Most of the material for the project will be imported from China. About 500 workers are currently employed by the project: 115 Chinese technicians and 385 Congolese. This appears to be China's largest project in Congo. Another Chinese company called WIETC has a joint venture agreement with a construction company called SOPROGI to build housing projects. In the first phase of construction, 103 houses will be built in Oyo, a city located 187 miles north of Brazzaville. This project is employing 70 Congolese workers and 12 Chinese engineers. On July 15, 2005, this company also began construction of low-income housing in Bacongo, a district of Brazzaville heavily populated by supporters of Pastor Ntumi, the leader of the Ninja rebels. Housing is a major social issue for low-income Congolese, and completion of this project will be highly valued by all Congolese, including Pastor Ntumi. This brief summary is not comprehensive; it is intended only to give a sense of significant economic development projects. There are others ongoing.

17. (SBU) In the area of human rights, there is a need for improvement. The Pygmies are still discriminated against in all aspects of society, and about 30 persons arrested in Pointe Noire in the spring of this year suspected of coup plotting are being held without trial. Efforts to implement the March 2003 Peace Agreement between the Government of Congo and the Ninja rebels continue. President Sassou has announced that legislative elections will be held in the Pool Region, probably in the winter. Chief Frederic Bitsango, alias Pastor Ntumi, has clearly expressed his intention to be a part of the political process and to seek election from the Pool. This poses a political challenge for the President since the incumbent Member of Parliament from the same District in the Pool Region is a close friend and political ally. In another District of the Pool Region the Minister of Commerce, Mrs. Adelaide Moundele-Ngollo, has indicated her intention to seek election. She is considered the front-runner in her district because of the popularity and reputation of her father who is highly revered in the region. Experienced observers believe that a way will be found to bring Pastor Ntumi into the government. An example of Ntumi's dialogue with the government may have already been shown.

18. (SBU) In April 2005, a convoy of 8 UN vehicles was attacked by armed Ninja rebels, robbed, and later released unharmed by Pastor Ntumi. The purpose of the UN Mission to the Pool was to assess conditions there. The convoy consisted of some 25 persons, including chiefs of UN Missions in the Congo, and journalists. One of the young boys, armed with a loaded gun, told the UNICEF Program

Coordinator "we are not bad people, we are just hungry." The rebels knew the convoy was coming and were waiting for them at a selected spot along the route. The fact that no one was harmed and that Pastor Ntumi personally rescued the mission and led them to safety gave rise to speculation that the entire incident was staged to make a political point.

THE BEACH TRIAL VERDICT

19. (SBU) The not guilty verdict announced by the Brazzaville Criminal Court last Wednesday (see reftel) clearing the senior military and police officials accused of crimes in the disappearance of some 350 refugees from the beach in 1999 did not surprise most observers. Those accused of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes were leaders of President Denis Sassou-Nguesso's support base within the military and police, including the Chief of Police. A guilty verdict against them would have been viewed as a betrayal of trust within the ranks and could have led to more serious disruptions and intrigue. The victor in a civil war that pitted north against south, tribe against tribe, and brother against brother, the President owes political favors to numerous individuals and groups for helping him win that war. These Sassou loyalists now hold key positions in government at all levels (including the judiciary), in international institutions, and in the private sector. His loyalty to them and their loyalty to him is the base of his power. Thus, the trial was held in response to demands from grieving families, human rights groups, and the international community for justice and transparency. The verdict, interestingly, found the government responsible for not adequately providing security for the refugees and ordered it to pay 10 million CFA (\$18,500) in compensation to the relatives of 86 of the missing refugees. None of the officials charged were found individually culpable for the disappearances.

10. (SBU) COMMENT: After 45 years of political instability, ideological shifts, and civil war, the Republic of Congo remains in an early stage of economic and political development. The resulting contradictions and distortions are strikingly obvious. The audacious accumulation of wealth in the hands of the President and his family in the face of widespread poverty and disease among the population, the huge amount of food imported into the country (estimated to be valued at 100 billion CFA, or 20 USD million per month) despite hunger, high unemployment and a low minimum wage, and the high level of government spending on champagne at official parties verses no books and benches for school children cannot be explained nor excused by the uneven impact of history. Strong political leadership and vision are required to reverse these trends. President Sassou says that he is now ready to step up to the plate and lead this nation out of poverty and into an era of economic and political renewal based on transparency and good governance. CDA recommends that we seize the opportunity of his planned visit to New York for the UNGA to encourage him to do just that and to improve the observance of human rights in Congo. CDA believes the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs is the appropriate level for this demarche' given the relatively early stage of many of these development programs, and CDA strongly recommends that AS Frazer undertake this initiative.

11. (U) Brazzaville Embassy Office - Anderson Meece